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By ALDETH LEWIN Daily News Staff

Family overcome by chemicals at St. John condo

V.I. agencies investigating incident at St. John condos

The family was being flown to the U.S. for medical treatment. All of them are in critical but stable condition, say local hospital officials.

ST. THOMAS— A vacation to St. John turned into a nightmare when a Delaware family of four were poisoned by an unknown chemical.

The family is in the process of being flown to the states for medical treatment. All of them are in critical but stable condition, according to local hospital officials.

The Environmental Protection Agency is working with the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources to investigate the details of how the family was poisoned and what the chemical was that made them so ill.

Friday, Emergency Medical Technicians responded to a call that four people staying at the Sirenusa Condominium Resort were extremely sick.

Schneider Hospital Chief Nursing Officer Darice Plaskett said the four people were transported from Cruz Bay, St. John, to the hospital on St. Thomas.

When they arrived at Schneider Hospital, they were in stable but critical condition and plans were made to transfer them to the states for treatment.

"Several have been transferred off island and we're making arrangements to have all transferred off island," Plaskett said.

At least one person was still in the hospital on St. Thomas as of press time this morning.

"There was an incident and it seems like a misuse or misapplication of a particular chemical," DPNR spokesman Jamal Nielsen said Monday. According to a statement issued Monday by the EPA, the investigation is looking to see whether the family was made sick by the pesticide methyl bromide, which may have been used to fumigate a room at the resort two days before

the family was hospitalized.

“The use of methyl bromide in the U.S. is restricted due to its acute toxicity. Only certified applicators are allowed to use it in certain agricultural settings, and is not authorized for use in dwellings. Health effects of acute exposure to methyl bromide are serious and include central nervous system and respiratory system damage,” the EPA release stated.

Family spokesman James Maron, a lawyer from Wilmington, told a Delaware newspaper that the victims are Steve Esmond, his wife Dr. Theresa Devine, both 49, and their two teenage sons who are in ninth and 11th grades.

The family lives in Wilmington, and are close family friends with Sen. Chris Coons (D-Del.), according to Coons’ office.

“Pesticides can be very toxic, and it is critically important that they be applied properly and used only as approved by EPA,” EPA Regional Administrator Judith Enck said. “Protecting people’s health in the U.S. Virgin Islands is of paramount importance. The EPA is actively working to determine how this happened and will make sure steps are taken to prevent this from happening to others at these vacation apartments or elsewhere.”

EPA officials said when the investigation is concluded, if any environmental regulations or laws were violated, the agency will work with DPNR to address it.

EPA and DPNR Investigating Apparent Chemical Poisoning

VI SOURCE

BY LYNDA LOHR — MARCH 23, 2015

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the territory’s Planning and Natural Resources Department are investigating what appears to be chemical poisoning by a pesticide that affected four members of a vacationing family from Wilmington, Del., according to representatives from both agencies. On Monday the EPA and DPNR both identified the pesticide as methyl bromide.

According to an EPA press release, methyl bromide may have been used March 18 to fumigate rooms at Sirenusa, a condominium resort overlooking Cruz Bay.

The use of methyl bromide in the United States is restricted due to its acute toxicity, the EPA indicated. Only certified applicators are allowed to use it in certain agricultural settings. It is not authorized for use in dwellings.

Health effects of acute exposure to methyl bromide are serious and include central nervous system and respiratory system damage, according to the EPA.

“Pesticides can be very toxic and it is critically important that they be applied properly and used only as approved by EPA,” said Judith A. Enck, EPA regional administrator. “Protecting people’s health in the U.S. Virgin Islands is of paramount importance.”

"The EPA is actively working to determine how this happened and will make sure steps are taken to prevent this from happening to others at these vacation apartments or elsewhere," Enck said.

The EPA indicated it is continuing to work with the local government and others to gather information and will ensure that appropriate steps are taken if it determines any environmental regulations or laws were violated.

Jamal Nielsen, spokesman for DPNR, declined to name the company that applied the pesticide but said it was a St. Thomas company.

The affected family members were identified in an email from Tatnall School and by The News Journal newspaper in Delaware as Tatnall School middle school head Steve Esmond, his wife Theresa Devine, and their two children.

"They were suffering seizures," according to Ronnie Klingsberg, who is the public information officer at St. John Rescue.

Klingsberg said Rescue and Emergency Medical Services transported the four from Sirenusa to the Liston "Huntie" Sprauve ambulance boat and on to St. Thomas on March 20. They were met at the V.I. National Park dock in Red Hook by two ambulances stationed at Roy L. Schneider Hospital.

Esmond family friend Mark Harvath said Steve Esmond was airlifted to a Delaware hospital, with the others treated at Schneider.

Darice Plaskett, the hospital's chief nursing officer, said confidentiality concerns prevent the hospital from releasing the specifics, but she said "individuals" from St. John were admitted and treated at the hospital.

"Several were transferred off-island," she said.

The Delaware News Journal reported in its online newspaper on Monday that all four were airlifted back to the mainland through assistance from Delaware Sen. Chris Coons. Coons' office would only confirm that Coons and the Esmonds were friends.

David Adams, who manages Sirenusa for Sea Glass Vacation, said his company was waiting to hear back from the government agencies that are investigating the issue. He said he couldn't answer any further questions.

The suspected chemical poisoning is now a topic on Internet travel forums. Tourism Department spokesman Luana Wheatley said the department is making every effort to be in touch with the family and is deploying its customer care staff member to assist.

"We are sorry about this unfortunate situation," she said.

Editor's Note: This story has been amended.

Pesticide poisons Del. family in Caribbean

Cris Barrish,

The (Delaware) News Journal

7:58 a.m. EDT March 24, 2015

A top Tatnall School administrator and his family suffered serious pesticide "poisoning" in their luxury condo while vacationing in the U.S. Virgin Islands last week, according to federal environmental officials and a Wilmington attorney who spent time with them on St. John.

Steve Esmond, the head of Tatnall's middle school, his wife, Dr. Theresa Devine, and their two teenage sons "were seriously exposed to a highly toxic chemical at their rental condominium," said James J. Maron, the lawyer from Wilmington who is acting as the family spokesman.

The family, who live in Wilmington, is in the process of being airlifted back to the United States and all except Devine are in critical condition, Maron said.

The suspected source of the poisoning is methyl bromide, which might have been used to fumigate a room at the Sirenusa resort where the family was staying, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said in a news release late Monday afternoon.

Methyl bromide is restricted in the United States due to its "acute toxicity," the EPA release said. "Only certified applicators are allowed to use it in certain agricultural settings and it is not authorized for use in dwellings. Health effects of acute exposure to methyl bromide are serious and include central nervous system and respiratory system damage."

The EPA release said agency officials would "ensure that appropriate steps are taken if it determines any environmental regulations or laws were violated."

"Protecting people's health in the U.S. Virgin Islands is of paramount importance," said Judith A. Enck, the agency's regional administrator. The agency is trying to determine "how this happened and will make sure steps are taken to prevent this from happening to others at these vacation apartments or elsewhere."

Esmond and Devine are both 49, and their sons are in 11th and ninth grade, respectively, at Tatnall - a prestigious private school in Greenville. Devine is a dentist who practices in Broomall, Pennsylvania, about 25 miles northeast of Wilmington.

Maron said U.S. Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware, who knows the Esmond family, is assisting them in their return to the United States.

Maron, who notified The News Journal Monday about the family's misfortune, said they traveled last week to St. John, a Caribbean island known for its natural beauty and beaches. St. John is a U.S. territory.

Esmond and his family were staying at the Sirenusa complex in the Capri villa, an \$800-a-night hilltop condo in an enclave overlooking Cruz Bay. Other Delaware families, including the Marons, also were in St. John and socialized with the Esmonds, Maron said.

The Capri is one of 22 Sirenusa villas managed and marketed by Sea Glass Vacations, according to its Internet listing. David Adams, an official with Sea Glass Vacations, said Monday he was meeting with other officials to determine what he could say.

Maron said the chemicals the family was exposed to "bio-accumulated and metabolized until it became an acute poisoning."

Over the weekend, he said, the family "began having seizures in the middle of the night and their lungs stopped working. They all had to be intubated. This is serious stuff."

Coons' office did not immediately comment on the Delaware senator's role in helping the stricken family, but spokesman Sean Coit said the senator "and his family are longtime, close friends of the Esmonds."

Maron said Coons was able to facilitate the EPA's involvement in the situation.

Charles A. Tierney, Tatnall's head of school, said a relative of Esmond told him Sunday that the family was "exposed to some sort of poisoning and their condition was described as critical but stable."

Tierney sent out a notice Sunday to families at the school and said the community has offered whatever support Esmond and his family need.

Tierney described Esmond as a "great school person" who has been head of the middle school, which serves about 130 fifth- to eighth-graders, for the last decade. Esmond has been at Tatnall for 26 years, and has been a high school history teacher and head football coach.

"In many ways this is hard to fathom," Tierney said. "It's really so unbelievable. We are all rallying together behind the Esmonds and sending them our prayers and healing wishes."

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